FAITHFUL DOUBTING
John 20:24-29
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Joseph Meister is probably not a name you recognize. Joseph Meister is remembered for living as a result of another man's skepticism, a scientist's unwillingness to be limited by the commonly accepted scientific truth of his day. He survived because someone had the courageto doubt. Joseph Meister's parents allowed Louis Pasteur to place in the body of their son the infectious virus which causes rabies. It was an act which broke all the laws of common sense and violated the procedures of good medicine. Pasteur had proved the disease results from germs which multiply in the body. He also had evidence that a weakened variety of microbes placed in an animal's body not only didn't kill the animal, but appeared to develop a resistance in the animal to the microbe. He called the startling new practice vaccination and had vaccinated sheep against anthrax. But he had never used the technique with a human being.

In 1882 he turned his attention to one of the most dreaded diseases of his age, rabies. He worked tirelessly to isolate the microbe. And then one day young Joseph Meister was bitten by a rabid dog, an inevitable fatal situation. Meister's parents had heard about Pasteur's research, came to the famous scientist and begged him to save their son. After intense personal struggle and doubt, Pasteur did the unthinkable. He placed a small amount of rabies virus under Joseph Meister's skin. He did it a number of times over a period of several weeks. The result was also unthinkable. Joseph Meister did not contract rabies. Louis Pasteur doubted the wisdom of his day.

Skepticism serves us well. A little bit of doubt, by and large, is a healthy attribute. The history of medicine is punctuated, fortunately, with the skepticism of people who were willing to question, call into doubt, the accepted ideas, practices, and procedures of their time. Physicians used to believe that blood washed back and forth inside the body like the tides of the ocean until Harvey proved that we have veins and arteries. It was assumed, earlier still, that draining off some blood was effective therapy, and long before, that holes drilled in the skull would release the pressure of migraine headaches. Skepticism has served us well.

see L. Thomas Youngest Science

In politics, skepticism is not the problem. Over the long haul gullibility is the consistent culprit, the willingness of people to believe whatever they are told. Free societies depend on the doubters, the healthy skeptics who call everything they hear into question, who do not believe something to be true simply because it was said by a cabinet official, General or President. Political scientists suggest that Hitler could not have succeeded here because inherent American skepticism would have snorted in scorn at goose stepping storm troopers and responded to Mein Kampf with a lusty, "Oh yeah? Prove it!"

There is a role for doubt in religion. It is to question everything. It is to ask about any assumption of authority in the name of God. It is to submit everything to common sense. The problem is that doubt is not often seen as a positive dynamic. In fact, at first thought, it appears that doubt is a condition good religion ought to alleviate. I am suggesting that the opposite may be closer to the truth. I believe there is such a thing as "faithful doubting". It's patron saint is Thomas, one of the twelve disciples whose consistent skepticism has earned him the nickname "Doubting Thomas".

There are many interesting traditions and legends about Thomas. When Vasco da Gama and his Portugese explorers finally arrived in India around 1500 they were utterly astonished to discover the Christian Church already there. They were equally astonished to learn that the Church's tradition attributed its founding to Thomas, one of the twelve. The ancient legend is that the disciples met after the crucifixion and resurrection to divide the world among themselves for missionary work. Thomas was given India. There are many wonderful, apocryphal stories about his experiences which have him traveling as far East as China. None of it can be proven. It doesn't appear that any of it was true. But there was a thriving Christian Church in India for a thousand years before Western Christians arrived on the scene, and that church itself understood its origins to be connected to the one we know as Doubting Thomas.

As a character is history, Thomas fades from view immediately after the resurrection, But we know about him from several intriguing references in the text. On one occasion, he seems to have been a strong and courageous influence among the disciples. When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, some of the disciples advised against going to his sisters because the trip would take them close to Jerusalem and danger. It was Thomas who rallied them: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Another time Thomas demonstrated the kind of straight-forward integrity, close to skepticism, which is very human and very helpful. At the last supper Jesus had made some veiled references to his own death and what was immediately ahead..."In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?...you know the way where I am going..." Thomas apparently wasn't very good at symbolism and metaphoric language and theological riddles. With admirable integrity he interrupted Jesus with a plea for clarity and simplicity. With the others sitting in awed silence, he said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going: how can we know the way." To which Jesus responded, "I am the way, the truth, the life." We can thank Thomas' skepticism for that.

And then Thomas turns up missing in the room where the disciples were hiding when the Risen Christ appears after the crucifion . Where do you suppose he was? I imagine the strong, painfully honest skeptic, unable to bear the deathly confinement of the place, risking - almost flaunting - his safety by walking the streets, wondering how he, Thomas, the common-sense skeptic - had been so totally taken in. The Galilean teacher he followed for three years had died like anybody else. It is no surprise - in fact, I am deeply comforted by the fact - that Thomas could not, would not believe the reports of the resurrection when he returned. Not until he saw the evidence, the almost clinically physical evidence, would he believe it.

I rather like knowing that about Thomas. I confess that I think his nickname is a compliment. I think the Christian faith appears remote and unreal at times because of faulty and incomplete images we have of its earliest adherents. The people around Jesus, the more I consider them, look like real people. They are not syruppy pious. They are not gullible. They are slow in understanding, slow to give up their own preconceived notions, slow to give up their own plans, reluctant to leave homes, reluctant to believe that love is powerful, reluctant to trust vulnerabllity and peacefulness and forgiveness. They complain about their safety, fall asleep at inappropriate times, interrupt sublimity with tastless arguments, and they simply refuse to believe. After the resurrection, when the

disciples are standing in the very presence of the Risen Christ, Matthew reports, "they worshipped him, even though some of them doubted". That's an incredible statement. Standing right there looking at him and still doubting. Doubting what? I love that incident. They sound like you and me. Even in the face of the evidence they had trouble believing.

I conclude that faith and doubt are not opposites. I take it further and conclude that faith and doubt are not incompatible. I'll go a third step and suggest that faith and doubt are not always in conflict. In fact, I suggest that faith and doubt are complimentary: that there is a very creative, counterpuntal tension between them. It is not easy, however, to sustain that tension in yourself. There is a counter force. There is particularly today, a very strong appeal to certainty: a deep human need for something, anything, we can know for sure. There is a powerful assumption that strong religion eliminates doubt and absolutely guarantees certainty about God, salvation, heaven and other matters. There is,I find, a deeply rooted assumption in many of us, that the "right stuff" religiously is without equivocation, uncertainty, hesitation or doubt of any kind: that to be "saved" is to be delivered from uncertainty to the promised land where it is all clear and simple and where there is no more doubt.

The philosophic dilemma is real. Religion deals with a dimension of human experience which does not submit to rational, verifiable evidence. No one has seen God. No one, after Thomas, has felt the evidence. In the absence of objective proofs the human need for certainty becomes more intense. We want to know it's true and if we can't know, in the same way we know the chemical formula for water, we want, at least, to "feel" that it is true. Professor Joseph Sittler cites the old hymn, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine" and observes... " this hymn suggests that nothing Christian is authentic until it has become a blessed assurance is some specifiable, warm, pervasive, and crucial experience." (p. 48, Grace Notes) Sittler recalls his experience as Dean at a Lutheran Theological Seminary and the steady stream of students in his office near the end of their senior year, fretting about the lack of certainty, doubting the authenticity of their call to ministry in the absence of an "interior confirmation".

The problem for them, and for us, is that there are people who are absolutely certain. The problem a daughter of mine had once was with a little friend who saw Jesus' face in the sky and her father burned his hand and Jesus made it well and "nothing like that ever happens in our house and you're a minister". The problem is the utter certainty of our friends who say things like, "When it happens to you, you'll know it," and the knowing smile when you confess bravely that nothing like that has happened to you - yet.

The behavioral sciences often seem to be the foe of religion. The reason is that behavioral scientists are suspicious of certainty and what it motivates people to do. I appreciate Rollo May on the subject. He writes: "People who claim to be absolutely convinced that their stand is the only right one are dangerous. Such conviction is the essence not only of dogmatism, but of its more destructive cousin, fanaticism. It blocks off the user from learning new

truth, and it is a dead giveaway of unconscious doubt..." (The Courage to Create, p. 13)

We don't have to rely solely on behavioral sciences, however. There are theological reasons for skepticism... about basing a faith on personal emotional responses. Joe Sittler writes: "It tempts us to hang the reality of God..on the warmth and immediacy of a feeling of blessed assurance." (op.cit., p. 48) "Is the opulence of the grace of God to be measured by my inventory?" he asks. "Is the great Catholic faith of nineteen centuries to be reduced to my interior dimensions?" (p. 50-51)

If my emotions are the arbiter of truth, what happens when my emotions are agitated, provoked, bent out of shape, or sick. Robert McAffee Brown once quipped that the brave declaration "God is dead" says more about the person making the statement than about God.

After a brief love affair with the scientific method we have learned that laboratory science is not an adequate measure for religion. But neither is the subjective, emotional, feeling responses of the individual. It is a mistake, I believe, to base your religion on either one solely. That's why we need the church, the fellowship. The best traditions of Protestantism have always questioned the individual experiences of revelation. Our sense of sin is too strong to trust the individual ultimately. Individuals are prone to make mental mistakes, or write theology while angry at a spouse, or pray while suffering with a headache. Luther's occasional harshness, it has been suggested - only partly in jest - was due in part to persistant gastro-intestinal distress. The fellowship, the church, is the corrective. Truth is measured by mind and heart and then submitted to the others for examination and response.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. In fact, there is a sense in which only the truly faithful are free to doubt; a sense in which faith allows us to question, probe, be skeptical.

Writing about the special kind of courage required for creativity, Rollo May suggeststhat "to believe fully and at the same time to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment." (op. cit., p. 14)

Some doubt is simply dispppointed expectation. The disciples may have doubted the authenticity of Christ's resurrection because he had already failed to fulfill their expectations. His crucifixion was the devastating evidence that he wasn't the Messiah they were expecting. His cross destroyed the hope that the Messiah would restore the nation to former glory. might and power. His death demonstrated something else, another kind of kingdom, an unexpected type of discipleship, and asked a commitment they did not want to give. Doubt always happens, I suppose, when the evidence doesn't prove what we want it to prove.

And some doubt occurs when we confront the radical nature of the fundamental Christian claim. The Gospel is about a God who suffered, a God who takes on humanity, and becomes fallible, vulnerable, weak. We doubt because that makes no common sense at all. The greatest stumbling block has never been resurrection:

it has always been the cross: the idea of love that willingly dies for the sake of the loved.

We are doubters, everyone of us. We doubt a lot of things in moments of quiet integrity... the choices of vocation, our spouse, our nation... the relevance of the faith, the skill of the coach... the existence of God. We are doubters, everyone of us. We need one another in order to believe. We help one another here. That is what the church is for. In hymns and prayers we help one another affirm what on a given Sunday morning we may not be able to affirm alone. We join voices with people we trust, who for the time being must carry our load of believing. We join, in spirit, with people we love who must do our praying and confessing and affirming for us. That's an important function of the church; not to quiet our doubts, but to help us live and act and believe in spite of them.

That's what faith is ... not burying our doubts, not repressing them, not ignoring them. Faith is living in the face of doubt. Faith is acting in spite of doubt. Faith is believing in tension with doubting.

Like a strong disciple, long ago, the one called "the doubter", on his knees before Jesus Christ, saying - in spite of doubt and skepticism - "My Lord and my God..." Amen.

God of all truth, help us to doubt vigorously, honestly. Help us support one another as we struggle with the complexities of our life and our faith. Give us courage to live with uncertainty, and faith to trust your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.